

Eros and Ideas in Plato
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My research this summer in political theory addresses what we are able to know and how we come to know it according to Plato. I separate this project into three parts. My research began with a sustained study of Plato's *Symposium*, which traces the ascent of erotic desire from ordinary desires, such as sexual expression, towards its most purified form, the good life, which always participates in philosophy. The ordinary, understood as the common web of human experience, is the plane from which we make our approach to philosophic wisdom.

The next question I asked is sequential: does a love of wisdom remain just that—a desire without ever attaining its object, wisdom—or does Plato suggest that we can actually articulate something significant about what it means to be wise? Plato stages Socrates as delivering the answer to this question in the famous myth of the charioteer in his dialogue *Phaedrus*. The myth of the charioteer posits that the rational part of the human soul is a chariot with horses pulling in opposite directions. The first horse pulls us up toward the hyper-Uranian *topos* of Forms, Beings, and Ideas; and the latter, a dark horse, pulls us down towards baseness and vulgarity. If we can glimpse the Forms, it is only because the rational part of the soul has pulled us up for a moment. Therefore, it is difficult to say that, for Plato, the philosophic life, depends on a secure intellectual grasp of the Forms. Instead, they remain as foundations that we are in search of.

The final part of my research asks what is to be done with philosophy if it cannot be said to result in a secure intellectual grasp of Forms. The second half of Plato's *Phaedrus* is dedicated to answering this question, and it makes the case that dialectical conversation can order someone toward right reason because it takes on the quality of life or the living presence of the speaker. This is in contrast to writing, where the speaker is absent or dead.

The question of writing in the *Phaedrus* has given rise to a number of disagreements on the status of writing and its relation to conveying philosophical meaning. The critique has been leveled most famously by Jacques Derrida in his essay *Plato's Pharmacy* that the argument of the *Phaedrus* collapses on itself because speeches themselves depend on the same structure as writing, revealing a deficiency in the “living” and “stable” reason articulated in speeches which it never previously acknowledged. *Contra* Derrida, I argue that Plato's use of myth (*μῦθος*) rightly orders the soul toward philosophy rather than dissolving philosophy into textual play. In other words, philosophy finds its culmination in the *Phaedrus* as perfect poetry. Poetry is that which attempts to access divinity but by itself can mislead people. Philosophy (and philosophic *eros*) attempts to access a different sort of divinity—eternity—but to Plato, “pure philosophy” is impossible, or at the very least discoursing about knowledge at the highest rung is impossible without beautiful, poetic presentation. In this way we return to *eros*. *Eros* is the link between the human things and the divine. Myth is that portion of Socratic dialectical conversation which links the human *to* the divine, putting the case for philosophy in poetic terms. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, I argue that philosophy is not grounded in the secure grasp of knowledge but in myth. The question of dialectic in the *Phaedrus* is conducive to a return to the primary question with which this sequence of dialogues begins: the erotic ascent towards Being.

I will expand upon my work this summer in an honors project in the department of Government and Legal Studies. To the extent that this project will bear fruit, I give all my thanks to my project supervisor, Professor Jean Yarbrough, who will advise me as I see this project through to its completion.

Faculty Mentor: Jean Yarbrough
Funded by the Bowdoin Research Award